

# THE HUMANITARIAN RESPONSE INDEX 2009



Whose Crisis? Clarifying Donor's Priorities

**DARA**



# **The Humanitarian Response Index 2009**

*Whose Crisis?*

*Clarifying Donor Priorities*



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DARA – Development Assistance Research Associates – is an independent, international, non-profit organisation, which works to improve the quality and impact of development and humanitarian interventions. We do this through research, evaluations, promoting learning and knowledge sharing.

DARA aims to enhance global efforts to reduce human suffering and inequity and encourage prevention. Our focus is on the improvement of humanitarian action, the promotion of international stability and development, and the reduction of disaster risk.

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*Crisis Reports*

# Colombia





## Colombia at a Glance

### Country data

- ▶ Population (2006): 46 million
- ▶ Under five mortality rate (2006): 6 per 1,000
- ▶ Human Development Index Ranking (2008): 80
- ▶ Life expectancy (2006): 73 years
- ▶ Official Development Assistance (2007): US\$730 million

### The crisis

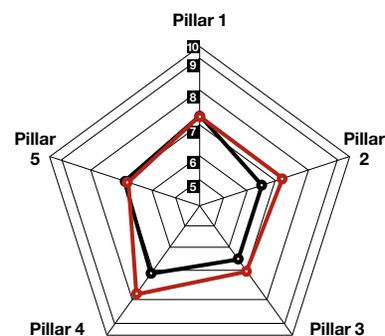
- ▶ Internal conflict has plagued Colombia for more than 50 years leaving 4.6 million displaced; 380,863 displaced in 2008 alone, a 25% increase from 2007;
- ▶ An additional 1,877,504 Colombians were affected by natural disasters in 2008;
- ▶ Overall deterioration of humanitarian situation and increase of human rights violations and violence since the establishment of President Uribe's Democratic Security strategy

### The response

- ▶ The Government of Colombia has attempted to minimise the extent of humanitarian needs, despite Colombia having some of the highest figures for IDPs and people affected by conflict in the world;
- ▶ 2008 saw humanitarian aid to Colombia drop by seven percent in 2008, falling to US \$40,822,975;
- ▶ Donor coordination is problematic due to the Colombian government's control over humanitarian operations and the lack of a Consolidated Appeals Process.

### Donor Performance

- ▶ Donors in Colombia performed slightly better than average in areas such as Responding to needs (Pillar 1) and Protection and International Law (Pillar 4). However, they rated poorly in the area of Learning and accountability (Pillar 5);
- ▶ Donors ranked well in survey questions around respecting the neutrality and impartiality of assistance; the lowest survey scores were in questions around long-term funding arrangements, flexibility of funding, and support for needs assessments;
- ▶ Donors were criticised for neglecting root causes of conflict and failing to confront the Colombian government on the deteriorating humanitarian situation.



### HRI 2009 scores by pillar

- Pillar 1** Responding to needs
- Pillar 2** Prevention, risk reduction and recovery
- Pillar 3** Working with humanitarian partners
- Pillar 4** Protection and International Law
- Pillar 5** Learning and accountability

- Colombia
- All crisis average

## Colombia *True Lies, Disappeared Realities<sup>1</sup>*

Fernando Espada

*"I believe that the task of making sense of ourselves and our behavior requires that we acknowledge there can be as much value in the blink of an eye as in months of rational analysis."*

Malcolm Gladwell, Blink

**V**olumes of research, articles and political statements have been written about the decades-long conflict in Colombia. But when it comes to actually understanding and confronting the humanitarian consequences of the crisis, the world seems to blindly accept the reality painted by the Colombian authorities and their allies – a reality that denies the existence of a humanitarian crisis, and obscures the role played by the government in contributing to – and even accentuating – humanitarian needs. In a crisis where so many people look the other way and there is always a rationalisation for the suffering, an intuitive analysis might be key for understanding what is really happening.

After three years of field research in Colombia for the Humanitarian Response Index (HRI) and almost 150 interviews with international and local NGOs, UN agencies, the Red Cross Movement and experts, this humanitarian crisis continues to show new nuances while hiding other key aspects. Most humanitarian actors interviewed by the HRI team could discuss the complexity of the Colombian crisis for hours. Few could imagine the solution to the crisis. A report by a consortium of British and Irish NGOs begins by admitting that "While all countries can claim to be complex, Colombia is more complex than most." (ABColumbia 2009, p2). Many of the respondents to the HRI accepted the exhaustion and pessimism that accompany a never-ending crisis. They seemed to understand donor countries' fatigue. But they also opposed the so-called 'complexity argument' as an excuse for inaction, a lack of commitment to the real victims and even the complicity of those who have the ability to stop the drama but choose instead to use it for their own benefit.

### An aggravated humanitarian situation

*"The Losada family was displaced from their ranch in the province of Florida due to menaces from... well, you know who."*  
RCN News 2009

The figures for internally displaced persons (IDPs) have been growing since 2003, when President Álvaro Uribe's Democratic Security strategy began, and at an ever-increasing rate since 2006.

This trend continued in 2008 when 380,863 people (76,172 families) were newly displaced in Colombia (CODHES 2009), "the highest rate of displacement in 23 years" (IDMC and NRC 2008, p8) and almost a 25 percent increase on the previous year. Since 2006, almost one million people have been displaced, bringing the overall number of IDPs to 4,629,190 (925,838 families) (CODHES 2009).

Nearly half a million Colombians were also forced, according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR 2009), to seek refuge in neighbouring countries – 250,000 in Ecuador, 200,000 in Venezuela, 17,000 in Brazil, 13,500 in Panama and 6,000 in Costa Rica.

In addition, natural disasters affected 1,877,504 Colombians in 2008 (SIGPAD 2008), with earthquakes, flooding, landslides and storms aggravating the humanitarian situation of IDPs, confined populations and other vulnerable groups. Massive floods in Chocó and La Mojana, where "seven out of ten households live below the poverty line" (Action Against Hunger USA 2008), led to a food and economic crisis in regions where the armed conflict was, and still is, intense.

### The Democratic Security strategy

In spite of the devastating humanitarian consequences of the military approach to the resolution of conflict in Colombia through the Democratic Security strategy, President Uribe has received overwhelming support both at home and abroad due to several factors: improved security in main urban areas, the demobilisation of paramilitary groups, and successful military operations against the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC). Does this support for the Colombian Government mean the humanitarian crisis is considered an acceptable consequence of ending the conflict in the country, albeit an undesirable one?

Not exactly. In Colombia, silence and denial are the norm; there is little freedom for outspoken opposition. The Colombian conflict is testimony to the power of storytelling – and, in this case, a story of conflict that is controlled, re-written and polished according to the interests of the elite.

José Manuel Santos, the former Defence Minister, recently published a 50-page evaluation report on the past three years (2006-2009) of Democratic Security. Page after page describes in detail the achievements, military victories and prospects for peace and stability. Interestingly, Minister Santos mentions the term “displaced” only once – and then only in a very limited context. This, despite the fact that the Colombian Government has the most accurate and up-to-date information about the situation in its territory.

In spite of the huge increase in IDP figures, President Uribe presented 2008 as the climax of Democratic Security. In March, Manuel Marulanda, the founder and head of the FARC, died. That same month, Raúl Reyes, the natural successor of Marulanda, was killed during an aerial and ground attack on the border with Ecuador. Four months later, Operación Jaque led to the rescue of 15 hostages, among them Ingrid Betancourt. As a result, President Uribe, the only Latin American president who has declared war against terrorism, saw his popularity rates boosted to unprecedented levels within his country and abroad.

Moreover, the FARC showed signs of weakness, losing leaders, troops and effective control over large parts of the territory. The Commander in Chief of the Colombian Navy even stated: “We are at the end of the FARC.” (McDermott 2008). And a donor country representative in Bogotá told the HRI team: “In many capitals, officials began to believe that the end of the conflict was near. What if the Colombian Government was right in its military approach?”

Such was the justification for encouraging international donors to take a post-conflict approach to Colombia, and to shift the focus from humanitarian concerns to a trade and development agenda. This would in turn lead to bilateral aid agreements, approval of the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) by the United States’ Congress and a new ‘face’ for Colombia as it hoped for new business and increased prosperity.

However, a year after these proclamations of victory, experts consider that “the insurgents are not close to defeat in the short or even medium term” (ICG 2009a, p24).

### Human rights violations

Beyond storytelling and disputes over numbers, human rights violations such as *falsos positivos* (what President Uribe calls extra-judicial executions) and the proliferation of new illegal armed groups present a very different reality from that of the President’s statements (ICG 2009b). According to the UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA): “The steady deterioration of the humanitarian situation is likely to continue due to competition over coca production, reported fighting between rebel groups and continued human displacement in areas of landmines, forcible recruitment of children and human rights violations.” (OCHA 2008, p3).

Unfortunately, the deteriorating humanitarian situation has not persuaded President Uribe to complement the Democratic Security strategy with a non-military approach, one concentrating on civic organisations. On the contrary, the Presidential Directive (1 March 2009) continues to prioritise the armed forces. Through a so-called ‘Strategic Leap’, the Directive has the final objective of recovering the Colombian territory currently under FARC and National Liberation Army (ELN) control in 2010 (just before the next presidential elections) through a detailed counter-insurgency strategy.

Most humanitarian actors interviewed for the HRI showed their concern for what could be, as one UN expert put it, “the perfect excuse for the illegal armed groups to see humanitarian organisations as legitimate military targets” – and the likely cause of yet another increase in the numbers of IDPs in 2009 and 2010.

### Donor support for Colombia

According to the Financial Tracking Service of OCHA, in 2008 a total of US\$40,822,975 of humanitarian aid was allocated for Colombia – eight percent less than in 2007 (OCHA FTS 2009). This figure, however, does not include the aid provided by the main donor, the US. Furthermore, in response to natural disasters the UN Central Emergency Response Fund (CERF) contributed \$3,135,341 in 2008 (OCHA FTS 2009).

The European Commission is the second largest humanitarian donor in Colombia with 34 percent of the total aid (OCHA FTS 2009). This amounted to almost US\$14 million in 2008.

Germany, Norway, Canada, Spain and Switzerland complete the list of donors with contributions well above US\$1 million in 2008.

### Who is to bell the cat?

*“They always talk about human rights, with the only intention of scaring the Armed Forces and the Police.”*  
Álvaro Uribe, February 2009

“The impossibility of accurately measuring the true dimension of [the Colombian] crisis makes the response even more difficult,” reported one of the experts interviewed by the HRI team. This was a common complaint among humanitarian organisations in Colombia (DARA 2009a). The interviewee went on to say that “the [Colombian] State wants donors and humanitarian organisations to assist the IDPs, but on the other hand, denies the existence of a humanitarian crisis,” as well as its actual dimension. The Colombian State pretends to be the only victim, internally and externally. Therefore, it would *deserve* uncritical international support. And it gets it from some donors.

Most of the people interviewed by the HRI team considered the international response to the humanitarian crisis positive in terms of financial support, but added that they wanted to see a much more critical approach by donor countries toward the Colombian authorities. As one experienced humanitarian worker reported: “The Colombian Government tries to control the response by placing conditions and obstacles everywhere. Incredibly, donor countries don’t react” (DARA 2009a). Some donor representatives in Bogotá justified their silence with a closed-doors diplomacy strategy. An argument that, for many humanitarian actors, is nothing but an excuse to justify donors’ complacency towards President Uribe’s policies. How can the international acknowledgement for improvements in issues like extra-judicial executions be understood when, at the same time, they are denied by the Colombian authorities? As one representative of a reputed international NGO (INGO) said: “We can’t continue to accept donors’ ingenuity. They know what is going on and who is co-responsible for the humanitarian crisis in Colombia. But, at the end of the day, they refuse to bell Uribe” (DARA 2009a).

The lack of both a common understanding of the crisis and a critical stand towards the Colombian Government is probably why there is no long-term donor strategy – something that most humanitarian actors interviewed by the HRI team in Bogotá said they wanted. As one said: “The international response in Colombia addresses the symptoms (IDPs, mines, demobilisation) but not the causes of the conflict (access to land, poverty, inequality).” So, at the end of the day, this interviewee continued, donor countries in Colombia tend to choose one of two approaches: strengthening civil society (which is efficient, but non-sustainable) and institution-building (which is inefficient, but sustainable). “Almost no donor has a coherent approach to both strategies” (DARA 2009a).

It seems that donor countries seem compelled – or even willing – to accept the narrow framework for action imposed by the Colombian authorities. The implications are obvious not only for an efficient response, but also for the *GHD Principles* such as independence, neutrality and access to affected populations.

Local NGOs were extremely critical of the charity approach of many of the international organisations. According to one displaced woman, “donor countries are responsible for helping to create a dependency framework”, where “you find yourself obliged to live in misery if you want to receive some support.” (DARA 2009b) So the question becomes, as stated by a local expert: “Why are international donors, the UN and the NGOs in Colombia? The crisis must be solved, not managed. And in Colombia, there is only crisis management” (DARA 2009b).

#### **The need for coordination**

*“Expatriates come and go. Organisations and their vices stay.”*

Local humanitarian worker

It is no surprise that coordination is also seen as one of the weakest pillars of humanitarian response in Colombia. According to a UN representative, “there is a huge gap between theory and practice in the [Inter-Agency Standing Committee] IASC” (DARA 2009a), notably due to the complexity of the context, but also because of the constant interferences of the government.

Nevertheless, many interviewees considered that “coordination in the field is sometimes efficient”, especially “when we need to respond to a natural disaster, but not when we try to respond to the humanitarian consequences of the conflict”. Apart from the interesting and useful experience of OCHA’s ‘Sala de Situación Humanitaria’ (a useful source of updated information), sharing information does not seem one of the best practices of humanitarian actors in Colombia: “Donors and humanitarian actors don’t share all the information. It is almost impossible to know who is doing what in real-time. That makes it hard to find gaps in the response and react properly” (DARA 2009a).

It is no surprise therefore that a donor representative in Colombia stated: “In spite of the fact that the most important GHD Principle is financing according to needs, we don’t know if the other donors are prioritising it in Colombia. Actually, it seems there is more attention to harmonisation of requirements and other secondary issues. We need to work on a consolidated analysis of the *Good Humanitarian Donorship*. So far, we don’t know whether funds are allocated according to needs in Colombia” (DARA 2009a).

A Consolidated Appeal Process (CAP) for Colombia may help to improve coordination between donors and humanitarian organisations. However, as the Colombian Government does not want to draw attention to the reality of the crisis, it refuses to allow any CAP, putting this potential solution out of bounds. Donor countries must make an effort therefore to reach an agreement with the Colombian authorities on a framework for efficient humanitarian coordination without political interferences.

In line with the concerns over the lack of a needs-based response, when the HRI team asked some beneficiaries about the impact of international aid on their lives, the answers were disappointing. “Most of the NGOs are briefcase organisations. They come with their funds, do what they want to do without asking us or even coordinating with other NGOs, and when they are done they leave,” explained a long-time displaced woman (DARA 2009b).

Other beneficiaries even criticised the big players: “UN agencies have their own agendas based on things we don’t understand. One year they only want to hear about ‘A’ and then the following year it is all about ‘B’” (DARA 2009b).

Many interviewees saw the root of this problem in the lack of funding for needs assessments. “Only Switzerland adequately funds them,” said a humanitarian worker (DARA 2009a). Others cited the poor support for monitoring and evaluation. “I have never received a call from a donor to comment on an evaluation,” said an INGO representative (DARA 2009a). Or perhaps, as a local NGO worker mentioned: “Donor countries have their agenda, but nothing to do with the needs and the context” (DARA 2009a).

Appropriate needs assessments, monitoring and evaluation are the backbone of every effective response, but are especially critical in a highly complex context such as the Colombian crisis. It is difficult to understand donors’ lack of attention to these aspects, all of which receive extensive consideration in the *GHD Principles*.

### **United States**

Plan Colombia is the backbone of the Washington-Bogotá partnership and a good example of uncritical bilateral support, at least in the public arena.

From 2005 to 2010, Colombian authorities will have received US\$4,144,559,972 in total – US\$1,132,220,970 of this as social and economic aid (Just the Facts 2009). Even though “the Obama administration plans to provide Colombia with less aid” in 2010 (a six percent reduction) (CIPCOL 2009), increasing the proportion of economic and social aid relative to military/police assistance, the fact is that the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) “is completely in line with the Colombian Government”. This, according to a humanitarian worker from an INGO, leaves the US’s Bureau of Population, Refugees and Migration as “a more independent actor, maybe because they work from [Washington] DC, avoiding the constant pressure of Colombian officials” (DARA 2009a).

Nonetheless, it is likely that this honeymoon between the White House and the Palacio de Nariño will be questioned by the US. According to an expert interviewed by the HRI team: “The White House acknowledges the success of Plan Colombia in helping consolidate Colombian institutions, the demobilisation process and the fight against the FARC, but not in the fight against *narco*s. They begin to see the glass half-empty.”

Nobody in the US is talking about an exit strategy yet, but the fact is that “Mexico is quickly eclipsing Colombia as an aid destination” (CIPCOL 2009).

### **The European Commission**

Meanwhile, the European Commission has failed to develop positively over recent years with respect to the core *GHD Principles*. While the EC’s Humanitarian Aid Office (ECHO) plays its natural emergency assistance role, many field interviewees in Bogotá considered the Commission delegation “to be more and more interested in commercial issues”, and thus ready to give more weight to bilateral aid.

An example of this is the recent evolution of the Aid to Uprooted People programme from a multilateral budget line into a ‘national cooperation programme’ (European Commission External Relations 2009) which is channelled through Acción Social, the Colombian agency for IDPs, to the INGOs that previously received the funds directly from Brussels. This reorientation of the programme puts those INGOs with projects in regions controlled by the guerrillas in a very difficult situation with regards to their perceived neutrality.

On the other hand, ECHO was defined as a consistent and coherent donor, even though many interviewees complained about its strict and difficult procedures, its lower profile and decreasing margin of manoeuvre compared with the delegation.

Other donors – namely Germany, Norway, Canada, Spain and Switzerland – seem unable to play an active and critical role towards the Colombian authorities, albeit for different reasons. Instead, each tries to strike a balance between its humanitarian action and its relations with the Colombian Government, keeping a low profile.

However understandable that approach may be, the fact is that neither the efficiency nor the impact of international aid benefits from such a cautious strategy. Moreover, according to one INGO worker, “donor performance in Colombia has been deteriorating for political (i.e. European Commission) or technical (i.e. Spain) reasons.”

In addition, many interviewees agreed that “most of the donors don’t have the capacity to control and verify the utilisation of their funds.” Even the main platform for donor countries in Colombia, the G24, “lacks a clear humanitarian orientation” (DARA 2009a).

An interesting case is that of the United Kingdom, a traditional ally of President Uribe that unexpectedly modified its support, mainly military assistance, to Colombia. In March 2009, ABColombia, released the report *Fit for purpose: How to make UK policy on Colombia more effective*, in which they denounced the fact that “there are presently no guarantees that individuals trained by the UK in human rights are not involved in human rights violations such as extra-judicial executions. British and Colombian citizens have a right to know more about what these training programmes look like, and the methods used to evaluate their success.”

The British Government responded by ending bilateral military aid to Colombia, although this decision did not affect counter-narcotics assistance.

## A way forward

*“We don’t eat houses.”*  
María, IDP.

So, what can donor countries do to improve the humanitarian response in Colombia? Many interviewees considered that donor countries should rethink their presence in Colombia and “agree on a common specific strategy for a protracted crisis” (DARA 2009a). For that, the strategy of ECHO, one of the few donors with a clear and consistent plan for Colombia, “could be a good reference” (DARA 2009a), as one humanitarian worker stated.

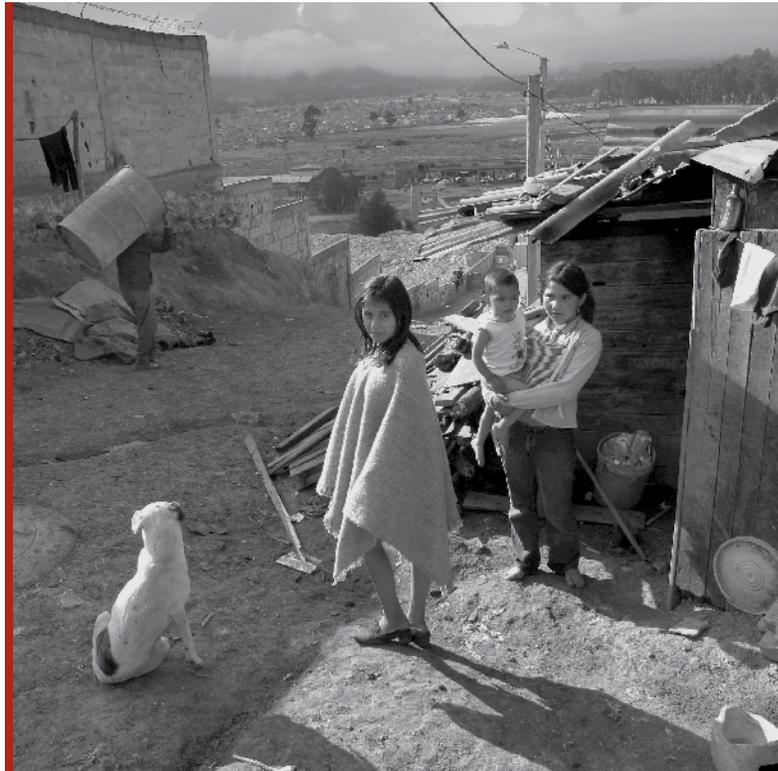
A second step should be “to recognise and make visible the magnitude and true nature of the humanitarian crisis”, something that would inevitably lead to “a stronger position versus the Colombian Government” (DARA 2009a). Such a step would also bring benefits in terms of coordination and needs assessments. Only then could the “integration of public policies, the respect of [International Humanitarian Law] IHL and human rights and the consolidation of peace and democracy in Colombia” (DARA 2009a) be possible, and we could begin to see light at the end of the tunnel.

Donor countries need to accept and understand the complexity of the Colombian crisis. But it is crucial that this does not lead to donor fatigue and the progressive abandonment of the country. A great deal of money and resources have been invested in the humanitarian response in the country, and much more will be needed if the situation fails to change radically, and violence and displacement continue to increase.

But more importantly, what Colombia also needs are more ears willing to listen, more eyes willing to see and more mouths willing to say out loud what is happening in the country. And then there is a need to act in consequence.

No more storytelling. No more blinks.

*“The Colombian Government tries to control the response by placing conditions and obstacles everywhere. Incredibly, donor countries don’t react.”*



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## About the Author

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Fernando Espada is an independent communications and strategy consultant for non-profit organisations. He was Communications Director of DARA, as well as of the think-tank FRIDE, until 2008. Prior to that, he was Managing Editor of the Spanish edition of *Foreign Policy Magazine*, published by FRIDE, by agreement with the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. From 2002 to 2006, he was Deputy Director of FRIDE. He is co-author, with Silvia Hidalgo, of the policy paper *Towards a New Spanish Cooperation Policy* (FRIDE 2006). Since 2007, Mr Espada has been a member of the Humanitarian Response Index field teams to Chad, Colombia (as Team Leader in 2008 and 2009), Somalia (in Nairobi) and Sri Lanka. He holds a BA in Political Science (Political Theory and Political Sociology) from the Universidad Complutense de Madrid.

## Notes

- 1 Information based on field interviews with key humanitarian agencies in Colombia from 16 May 2009 to 27 May 2009, and 202 Questionnaires on donor performance (including 119 OECD-DAC donors).

The HRI team, composed of Fernando Espada, Belén Camacho, Eva Cervantes and Yunuen Montero, expresses its gratitude to all those interviewed in Colombia. The opinions expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of DARA.

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